

June 3, 2020

The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau, P.C., MP
Prime Minister of Canada
Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0A2

The Honourable Chrystia Freeland, P.C., M.P.
Deputy Prime Minister
Privy Council Office, Room 1000
80 Sparks Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0A3

The Honourable Bill Morneau, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Finance
90 Elgin Street, 17th Floor
Ottawa ON K1A 0G5

Dear Prime Minister Trudeau, Deputy Prime Minister Freeland, and Minister Morneau:

RE: Basic Income during and after the COVID-19 Pandemic

The North Bay Parry Sound District Health Unit (Health Unit) staff and Board of Health are deeply concerned about the consequences of inadequate and insecure income on the health of our local communities. Health inequity is an ongoing challenge that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. We join many other health organizations in the call for a guaranteed basic income to better protect the health of our communities now and in the future.

We commend the Canadian government for swiftly implementing income-based responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), the Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB), and the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS). These programs and other economic supports are offering relief from financial difficulties for many Canadians, allowing them to pay the rent and put food on the table.

However, these income-based responses also highlight the significant limitations and gaps within our current social safety net that many Canadians were navigating and struggling with prior to the pandemic. In 2017-2018, an estimated 4.4 million Canadians (12.7% of households) did not have enough money to put food on their tables.

This number is higher than any previous national estimate and is determined by the national measure of Household Food Insecurity (HFI), a highly sensitive indicator of an extreme level of material deprivation that negatively impacts people's physical, mental, and social well-being, and life expectancy.

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In our Health Unit region, it is estimated that 1 in 7 households experience food insecurity, and in 2019 the monthly cost of healthy eating was \$936.32 for a family of four. Food-based responses such as investment in charitable food distribution systems do not address the long-term income problem of those who are also struggling to pay rent and other expenses. Before COVID-19, only about 25% of people experiencing HFI in Canada used food banks.

In addition to deteriorated circumstances for many due to COVID-19, it is clear that even more Canadians will experience HFI resulting from widespread work stoppages and job losses associated with the pandemic.¹ Further, reverting back to previous income support systems after the pandemic will not address the problem. In 2017-2018, 60% of Canadian households reliant on social assistance experienced food insecurity. For these households, the levels of deprivation were substantial, with those experiencing the most severe forms of HFI actually going without food because of a lack of money. Locally, 70% of individuals experiencing homelessness in Nipissing District in 2018 were social assistance recipients.

The health consequences of the material and social deprivation caused by insecure and inadequate incomes include shortened life expectancy, chronic diseases, infant mortality, addictions, and many other physical and mental health impairments. Our Health Unit has advocated to the provincial government for the past several years about the importance of adequate incomes to reduce food insecurity and improve health and social outcomes. During this pandemic, the importance of adequate incomes as an emergency preparedness measure has also come to our attention. To protect households from the health consequences of a temporary loss of income in the future, sustainable and adequate income supports must be in place.

There is growing support for the concept of a basic income as can be seen in Appendix A. We join the many provincial and national health organizations calling for immediate action to enact legislation for a basic income guarantee that protects and promotes the health of working-age citizens in our communities.

Sincerely,

Original Signed by Dr. Jim Chirico

James Chirico, H.BSc., M.D., F.R.C.P. (C), MPH
Medical Officer of Health/Executive Officer

C. The Premier of Ontario
North Bay and Parry Sound district MPs and MPPs and municipal councils
Association of Local Public Health Agencies
Ontario Public Health Association
Boards of Health in Ontario

Enclosure: Appendix A

¹ Households whose main source of income was either pensions or dividends and interest had the lowest rate of food insecurity (6.8%), a finding consistent with research that demonstrates the protective effect of Canada's public pension system. In contrast, 32% of households whose main source of income was Employment Insurance or Workers Compensation were food insecure.

Appendix A: Examples of Support for Basic Income in Response to Covid-19 and Beyond

On May 20, 2020, the Board of Health of the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit sent a letter to the Prime Minister of Canada to recommend the government “take swift and immediate action on the evolution of the CERB Benefit into legislation for a basic income as an effective long-term response to the problems of income insecurity, persistent poverty and household food insecurity, as well as a response to the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.”

On April 21, 2020, 50 members of Canada’s Senate wrote a letter to the federal government calling for a restructuring of the Canadian Emergency Relief Benefit (CERB) into a minimum basic income to “ensure greater social and economic equity”, especially for those who are most vulnerable. In support of this letter, Senator McPhedran’s Youth Advisory Council, the Canadian Council of Young Feminists, in collaboration with the Basic Income Canada Youth Network, sent their own letter to the federal government.

The Ontario Dietitians’ of Public Health (ODPH) have also written a letter to the federal government stating “We ask that you take immediate action to enact legislation for a basic income guarantee as an effective long-term response to the problem of persistent poverty and household food insecurity as well as shorter-term consequences of the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic”.

The Board of Health of the Kingston, Frontenac, Lennox and Addington Health Unit in Ontario also passed a motion requesting the federal government to provide a basic income support to all Canadians (News Story).